DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 597 CS 212 973

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TITLE English Assessment in a National Curriculum.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (36th, Las Vegas, NV, May 6-10, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Testing; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Curriculum; *Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; Informal Assessment; Models; *National Competency Tests; Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *England; National Standards; *Wales

ABSTRACT

Assessment in the National Curriculum in England and Wales is an example of a different model. The report of the government-appointed working group on assessment, Task Group on Assessment and Testing (1988), states that assessment: (1) is an integral part of both teaching and learning; (2) should not determine what is to be taught and learned; and (3) should inform teachers and provide feedback on success of teaching, and inform future teaching plans. The national system proposed by the working group would be a combination of teachers' own records and assessment results, together with the results of Standard Assessment Tasks. This combined information will act in four distinct ways: diagnostic, evaluative, formative, and summative. In 1990 600,000 7-year-olds were the first to be assessed nationally. Results will go through a process of moderation to establish the feasibility of the whole exercise, and to begin to establish baselines of achievement by which standards can be monitored. Examples of Profile Components for reading/writing illustrate the procedures by which teachers gain information about pupils' achievements by engaging them in a number of different activities. Teachers have welcomed the activities designed for their use, and have been stimulated to reflect critically on their own practice. However, teachers are finding it difficult to conduct the assessment within the context of busy classrooms. The whole experience of assessment for teachers of 7-year-old pupils has been one of great pressure. At this writing, it is not possible to evaluate the outcomes of this process of national assessment. (SR)

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ED384597

English Assessment in a NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Paper presented at International Reading Association Annual Convention, Las Vegas USA 1991

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Introduction

Assessment in the National Curriculum in England and Wales is an example of a different model. A framework for assessment was first of all outlined in theory and only later has the curriculum and assessment procedures been designed to actualise this framework in practice.

In this paper I will firstly outline the main points of the assessment framework, secondly illustrate from English how this has been translated into curricular terms and lastly how our first experience of national assessment is being considered by teachers.

National Framework for Assessment

The report of the government appointed working group on assessment, Task Group on Assessment and Testing (1988), was published before curriculum documents for the National Curriculum in order to inform the curriculum panels and provide them with a framework for national assessment.

The major points of the report include:

1. assessment is an integral part of both teaching and learning

2. assessment should not determine what is to be taught and learnt

3. assessment should inform teachers and provide feedback on success of teaching, and inform future teaching plans.

The working group acknowledged that teachers typically use a wide range of sources to provide information for assessment:

general impressions
marking class work
pupils' self assessment
rating scales
check lists
practical and written tests

However, across the country as a whole there has been little comparability. The national system proposed by the working group would be a combination of teachers own records and assessment results, together with the results of Standard Assessment Tasks.

Standard Assessment Tasks will now be administered nationally at each of the four Key Stages for pupils aged 7, 11, 14 and 16 years. Their purpose will be to supplement the continuous records of teachers and this combined information will act in four distinct ways:

diagnostic
evaluative
formative
evaluative

Assessment at age 7 years is aimed primarily at identifying pupils in need of help and will serve a diagnostic and evaluative purpose. Formative information will be collected in order to plan future work. Only at the final Key Stage (16 years) does the assessment become summative.

Subject Committees were asked to establish a profile of components for each subject rather than aiming for a single assessment of a subject area, e.g. one score for English. The working group also recommended that progress in subject areas should be defined by a progression of ten levels in each profile component.

Assessment in English

The English working group reported during 1989 and children in Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7 years) have been following the National Curriculum in English, mathematics and science since that time. This year, 1990, those five year olds are now aged 7 years and are the first to be assessed nationally. 600,000 seven year old pupils in schools in England and Wales are currently being assessed. Teacher Assessments were completed by the end of March and Standard Assessment Tasks will be completed before the end of May.

Teacher Assessment for 7 year olds related directly to the statements of attainment for each profile component in the first three levels. Standard Assessment Tasks also addressed these statements, but through activities which are common across all children in schools throughout England and Wales. These two different kinds of information will go through a process of moderation during June and July this year in order to establish firstly, the feasability of the whole exercise, and secondly, to begin to establish baselines of achievement by which standards can be monitored.

The tasks invite teachers to gain information about pupils' achievements by engaging them in a number of different activities. An example of this procedure with respect to the Profile Component, Reading, is shown below:

Reading

A Early Reading

* Ask the child to choose a familiar book and to talk about the reasons for the choice.
* Ask the child to talk about the book
* Ask 'Where does it tell me what to say?' or 'How do I know what to read?'
* Ask the child to pick out some words and to name some letters.

B Individual Reading and Discussion

* Ask the child to read three signs
* Select a book from Level 2 list
* Read through the beginning of the book with the child
* Make a running record of selected passage

* Ask the child to tell you what has happened in the passage read and in the book so far and, what might happen next.

C Listening to Stories

* Read the story aloud to a small group of children (select book from Level 3)
* Lead a discussion about the story
* Ask further questions if necessary to draw out children's understanding of the structure of the story.

D Individual Reading, Silent Reading and Discussion

* Select a book from Level 3 list
* Ask the child to look through the book and prepare to read the opening passage aloud
* Ask children to read the rest of the story to themselves
* Ask each child to tell you about the story
* Continue the discussion by following up what the child has said in order to assess understanding beyond the literal level.

E Reference Books

* In the course of topic work or humanities work, ask the children to decide what they need to find out more about
* Ask the children to find or suggest a book that might supply the information.

The Booklist suggested for teachers is set out in three difficulty Levels (Levels 1-3). Authors listed at Level 1 include John Burningham, Suzanna Gretz and Pat Hutchins. At Level 2; Eric Carle, Shirley Hughes and Arnold Lobel. At Level 3 Margaret Mahy, Rodney Peppe and Maurice Sendak.

Writing

A Writing a Story

* Set up a purpose and an audience for the Children's story writing
* Help the child to decide upon a subject and a title for their stories
* Ask the child to write a story

B Redrafting

* Discuss the story
* Ask how it might be improved to help a reader

C Spelling

* Ask children to attempt their spelling without help
* Ask children to identify these spellings they were not sure of; to look up one or more words in the dictionary; to spell the word aloud; and, where appropriate, to correct their work
* Question the children about their writing to check that they understand the difference between drawing and writing, and between letters and numbers
* Ask the children to write some letters as you name them, and to write the first sound of some words, as you say the whole word.

D Handwriting

* Make an assessment of children's handwriting
* Continue the discussion by following up what the child has said in order to assess understanding beyond the literal

Teacher Responses to Assessment at Key Stage 1

What we see here is a remarkably ecologically valid form of assessment which mirrors the vision of the original framework; assessment is to be closely related to everyday classroom activities and should, therefore, provide teachers with information which will help them in planning future work. However, inevitably it has played its part in determining what is to be taught and learnt, and influenced teachers' choice of resources.

The books on the list published by government, for instance, were instantly sold out of every bookshop in the country, indicating that schools did not have these kinds of authentic texts ordinarily in their classrooms. Many needed introducing to the use of running records and an extensive programme of training prepared teachers to assess their children and conduct the Standard Assessment Tasks.

At this moment in time, when teachers have completed their first experience of Teacher Assessments and are in the process of administering Standard Assessment Tasks, the activities designed for their use have been welcomed. They have been found to be successful in reflecting what children can do and how they can plan their future work. More importantly, the whole process has stimulated teachers to critically reflect on their own practice. In some cases the children have enjoyed the experience so much that they have asked for "more of what we did yesterday, please".

One anxiety, before this process of assessment was embarked upon, suggested that Teacher Assessment results may reflect more what teachers had taught rather than what children had learned. However, so far the indications are that the results of Standard Assessment Tasks are confirming those of Teacher Assessments and in some cases showing that teachers, through Teacher Assessment may well be under-estimating what children know and understand.

However, as might be imagined there are problems. In English alone there are 53 statements of attainment to assess, with an additional 79 in mathematics and 96 in science. While not all of these have been included in the Standard Assessment Tasks, teachers are understandably finding it difficult to conduct the assessments with individuals and groups of pupils within the context of a busy classroom. The rhythm of their work in class has been disrupted for a long period. In some instances, schools have used money from sensitive areas of their budget to cover ancillary help, e.g. from money allocated for special needs pupils.

The whole experience of assessment for these teachers of 7 year old pupils has been one of great pressure. Pressure to get it done and pressure to do it right in the glare of public scrutiny during this first period of national assessment. Parents, in some cases, have put pressure on their children to 'perform well' and this has resulted in some cases with children not joining in the assessment activities and remaining silent in the face of their teachers' questions.

At this stage, it is not possible to evaluate the outcomes of this process of national assessment. While the government invited bids from researchers to monitor the

whole process, it was decided not to fund the exercise in the belief that such additional work and scrutiny would overburden schools even more.

At a time in England, when the debate rages concerning reading Standards and the need to teach phonics to all 5 year olds, a process of monitoring and evaluation is essential as major changes sweep through our schools. Government is now scrutinising the teaching of reading throughout the school system and at the level of teacher training. Psychologists are attacking the new forms of assessment because they are seen by them as neither valid nor reliable. They are arguing that the government will not be able to monitor standards through the framework that is being established. The debate continues in our national newspapers and through the intervention of our Royal Family. How political ambitions and the needs of teachers and children are to be reconciled has yet to be decided.